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Targeting, Accountability and Youth Work Practice

Abstract

Using the findings of an investigation into detached and outreach youth work, sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, this article considers tensions between generic youth work and contemporary policy initiatives. It is argued that there are fundamental and distinguishing aspects of youth work practice in terms of relationships, partnerships, and time which enable youth workers to undertake successful interventions with groups of young people who are defined as 'socially excluded'. However, the demands of government policy in relation to targeting and accountability are in tension with practice in these key areas. Without a clearly articulated and specific language of youth work practice, the very aspects of youth work which make it attractive to policy makers are in danger of being undermined by policy.

Key words

Youth work, professional accountability, targeting, youth exclusion, JRF.

The advent of the Connexions service for young people (DfEE, 2000) stimulated an altogether unfamiliar experience for youth work, moving it from the margins towards the centre of youth policy. The significance of youth work to the achievement of 'the vision' of the Connexions partnerships was articulated in *Transforming Youth Work: Developing Youth Services for Young People* (DfEE, 2001). This was followed by *Transforming Youth Work: Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* (DfES, 2002). In the later document (*REYS*), extra and secure resources were promised to secure a high quality contribution from youth work to the delivery of services for young people.

There are indications of waning enthusiasm for Connexions (Holmes, 2004). Its incorporation with youth work into the terms of the new Children Bill (2004) (DfES, 2003) suggests a shifting of attention from 'youth' to 'child' concerns (Editorial, 2004:2). Nevertheless, youth work practice continues to be systematically refashioned in accordance with the *Transforming Youth Work* (TYW) initiative (Barrett, 2004:7) and youth services are experiencing a tightening of their criteria of accountability devolved from central government.

Insofar as the terms of reference for reconfigured Youth Services derive directly from the policy intentions of Connexions, then youth workers are constrained in their practice by the conceptual perspectives informing Connexions. Thus although TYW takes recognisable youth work concerns as its key themes, (eg. participation, citizenship, curriculum), it mobilises these concepts to set targets and specify outcomes which are related to, but do not derive from youth work itself. Rather they derive from the discourse which informs contemporary political decision making in relation to 'youth' and to public services.

Conceived as a 'youth support service' (Davies, 2000; Wylie, 2004), Connexions rests upon ideas about youth as transition (Irwin, 1995). *TYW* is therefore devised to help 'young people through the transition from adolescence to adulthood' and it is claimed that 'Government has set in place a wide range of policies and programmes designed to improve the health and welfare of children and young people and to support them in making the transition to adult life' (DfEE, 2001:5). Transitional theories prescribe incremental 'youth development' approaches for services (Smith [M.K], 2003). Thus the role of the Connexions Personal Advisor (PA) is to facilitate smooth transitions for individual young people by responding to their identified problems and issues and directing them to appropriate complementary services. The success of this building-block approach can be evaluated by considering the outcomes achieved at each stage of intervention.

In contrast, youth work has traditionally considered youth as a period of 'being' as much as of 'becoming' (Davies and Gibson, 1967; Davies, 2000; Jeffs and Smith, 1998/9). For youth workers, the ideal is to affirm the positive aspects of young people's collective as well as individual identities, to enable them to better understand their present. From this perspective, they encourage constructive and reflective understanding in the here and now ('starting where the young people are at') in order to create futures which by definition cannot be pre-planned. Hence the dominant ethos within youth work is one of 'process' rather than 'outcome'. This does not mean that outcomes are not achieved, but that they cannot be pre-figured. Traditionally, youth work is holistic and young people are considered in terms of their humanity rather than their problems or 'deficits' (Wylie, 2003:23). Thus there is a conceptual tension for youth work at the very heart of the *TYW* approach.

The transitional 'life stage' approach of 'youth' policy contradicts the political imperative to create more efficient public services through a process of targeting social exclusion. Connexions is ostensibly a universal service, but from the outset it has been targeted much more intensively upon those young people identified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and there are demands that it should be further targeted in this respect. This policy contradiction translates into further tensions in youth work practice (Bessant, 2004).

Limited resources mean that youth work is in practice a targeted service, but such targets are self-defined. The ideal of universalism remains central to practice. This principle expresses the informal, social educational approach based on voluntary participation. Through a process of dialogue and social engagement, youth work programmes are designed to encourage association, friendship and co-operation between young people who choose to participate. This view is dominant within British youth work theory (Davies and Gibson, 1967; Davies, 1999;

Young, 1999; Jeffs and Smith, 2002). The *REYS* document pays lip service to universalism whilst simultaneously emphasising a 'strategic' approach. A significant proportion of youth service resources must be targeted, 'towards those young people [aged 13-19] where needs are greatest' and 'the target population will include a locally agreed target for those assessed as not in education, employment or training (NEET) or who are at risk of, or who already fall into the following categories: teenage pregnancy, drugs, alcohol or substance abuse or offending' (DfES, 2002:8,10,16).

Problem-focused targeting and emphasis upon transitions and outcomes create difficulties which are exacerbated by the policy-led approach to partnership central to Connexions. Youth workers have always co-operated with related professions, but this has historically emerged from the imperatives of practice rather than policy.

Despite complaints that their work is 'not understood' and signs of disquiet around the increased burden of bureaucracy and management associated with the reforms, conformity is being systematically imposed. Meanwhile, the financial incentives have seduced cash starved youth workers into collusion. *REYS* has been hailed as the most exciting development since the Albemarle Report provoked the growth period of the 1960s (Smith, [A] 2003). Thus the face of youth work practice is changing.

The JRF Research

The emphasis upon targeting socially excluded young people has drawn attention to the potential importance of detached and outreach youth workers who have long claimed privileged access to young people beyond the grasp of partner services. Because of their 'reach', these youth workers were identified at the outset as especially suitable for undertaking the Connexions Personal Advisor (PA) role in relation to the most problematic young people (DfEE, 2000; 2001).

In this context, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned an 18-month research project to assess the possibilities of detached and outreach youth work within the new policy environment (Crimmens et. al. 2004). The research, undertaken by a team from the universities of Luton, Lincoln and Durham, surveyed the extent and nature of provision in England and Wales. From an initial 'mapping' exercise, using data from national voluntary organisations and from Local Authority providers, 1,560 projects were identified of whom 564 returned a questionnaire. From these 564, a typology was devised and used to select 31 who participated in telephone interviews. Subsequently, an in-depth participant observational study was undertaken of a representative sample of eleven projects from the 31. Finally, a developmental weekend workshop was organised which included two workers from each of the eleven projects.

The research data suggests that detached and outreach workers consider themselves to be first and foremost *youth* workers. They explain successful work with young people primarily through the philosophy and methods of generic youth work. The type of young people involved, and the context within which the work is undertaken appear to be secondary factors, even when they are functioning under the terms of a specific targeted and outcome-led initiative such as the Youth Inclusion Projects.

The findings indicate that there are qualities unique to youth work which enable constructive intervention with a range of young people, including those defined as NEET. The research was undertaken before Connexions and *TYW* were fully established, but there were already signs of discomfort among the participants about the affect of policy upon their practice. Significant elements of practice were discussed which suggest that adapting youth work to fit policy is not quite as straightforward as *TYW* implies.

This article abstracts three related elements of generic youth work practice from the JRF data which seem particularly at odds with the policy imperatives. The data indicates the particularity of youth work in respect of *relationships, partnerships, and time*. It is argued that in these three areas there are disjunctures between policy and the realities and ideals of youth work practice. It is suggested that youth work is currently experiencing a dangerous moment in which the very aspects of the work which make it attractive to policy makers could be undermined by policy and that it is therefore urgent that practitioners articulate more clearly the specific nature of their practice.

Relationships

That's the key... it's actually going out on their terms and developing real relationships with people and spending time with them (4)¹

The relationships created between youth workers and young people are wholly voluntary and negotiated (Davies, 2000; Davies, 2003:8). Although they inevitably raise questions of power, these relationships are constructed within a value base which stresses justice and equality. Power is a matter of professional self-consciousness, to be used always for the advantage of the young person. In this sense, the ideal relationship eschews the possibility of competition, domination or dependence. It affirms that young people and youth workers engage as equals in terms of their common humanity. Thus the personal, subjective and the professional, objective elements of the youth work relationship are inextricably interwoven.

It can never be a simple matter to speak about youth work relationships within a professional language because of the inter-personal sub-text. Of course there have been youth workers who have exploited their professional power to create inappropriate or abusive relationships with young people. Others have found it difficult simply to distinguish between the personal and the professional. This problem, mentioned by some respondents in the JRF research, was noted as a feature of some of the earliest 'experimental' detached projects (Evans, 1974). The subjective, personal elements of the youth work relationship contain significant elements of risk. Consequently, there is a tendency to talk about the importance of 'relationships' without specifying what this means in practice. Often the personal element is simply implied:

for personal skills you don't hide behind a snooker table, or a table tennis table, or whatever. We're out there doing it and young people will soon tell you if you're not doing a good job (1).

Detached and outreach youth workers are aware that they intrude without invitation and are particularly sensitive to the voluntary participation of the young person. The worker's sense of self is emphasised, but there is no professional legitimisation for 'self' in this context. This must be privately managed:

You're in the young people's place, you're on their ground and if they don't want to talk to you they'll just walk away...So you have to respond or be responsive to that (3).

You could say the youth workers are infringing on young people's space, because the reason the young people are on the streets is because they don't want to be around adults, and that's the debate you go through when you're doing detached work, 'do I have the right to be here?' (2).

The sensibilities of detached workers to the risks of 'relationships' which depend upon mutual trust, highlight the importance of their professional commitment to work in the self-identified interests of the young people involved. This cannot be a completely objective process. 'Interests' are clarified within the relationship. For example, whilst it might be possible to 'target' young women 'at risk' of pregnancy, preventing pregnancy cannot be a pre-determined outcome:

*As youth workers we are not going there to stop the pregnancy rate etc. We go with a positive approach - to enhance lives. And you don't know until you start working and building relationships if the young person has issues
(Workshop Notes).*

The youth worker must acknowledge complex and diverse perspectives, otherwise the authenticity of the relationship with the young person is undermined (Smith [H.], 2002). Authenticity implies that youth work cannot be reduced to 'delivering a service'. Services and outcomes are integral but they are only part of the picture. Practice is an interpretative act in which flexibility and openness are crucial. There are always aspects of face to face youth work which are 'accidental', which cannot be controlled, anticipated or planned:

The focus will come from what happened in that session...For instance,... an issue would be raised ...and they would work with a group of young people on whatever the problem would be...It could be crime; it could be careers; it could be relationships; it could be anything really....Lack of leisure facilities, ... it could be anything....it could be 'I want to do a trip and I want to go ice-skating. If we got 7 people could we do it?' ...and the answer would be 'Yes' (15)

In such a process, the REYS demand for accredited outcomes related to a predetermined framework or 'curriculum' is inherently problematic for the youth worker (DfES, 2002:11). Even the less onerous criterion of 'recorded' outcomes (DfES, 2004) is difficult in the above example. Is the outcome to be emphasised as seven people 'turning up' or one young person learning to ice-skate? This could only be decided with reference to pre-planned criteria and these would interfere with the process of participative engagement.

The requirement to evaluate, record and count 'achievement' either undermines the possibility for developing meaningful relationships, or encourages a degree of 'doublespeak' in recording outcomes. One manager in the research suggested that 'creative accounting will be needed in order to meet the TYW targets' (Project 23). Another was self-consciously acting as a buffer between bureaucratic demands and the necessity of protecting youth work on the ground:

I know some colleagues who have got very hot under the collar about changes in recording and data collection and have passed that down to part time staff who just turned round and said 'Well I didn't come into youth work to do that and sod it, I'm off'... And I've not done that. So you know if I was Ofsted-ed I might be criticised for some of my paperwork, but I'd rather protect my staff from the worst aspects of that and keep them delivering good quality youth work, even if I can't prove it, than I would not have any staff and the best kept paperwork in the world (9:)

Whilst such efforts to protect the work are well intentioned, they are no substitute for the possibility of youth workers confidently describing the nature of practice reality. Unfortunately, youth work is subsumed within professional language which derives from other, more dominant approaches – such as teaching or youth justice, where the required outcomes are more clearly

defined. This is not a new situation, but it becomes particularly problematic within the partnership approaches instigated by Connexions.

Partnerships

Bauman (2003:xii) argues that 'relationships' have been replaced with 'networks' in contemporary society. This insight can illustrate the tensions facing youth workers. Connexions is a model of networking *par excellence*. It assumes parity and consensus between connected professions and requires from workers only the skills and knowledge which will facilitate the best outcomes for 'clients'. 'Relationship' is not appropriate here. The young person's agenda is relevant but only with reference to the achievement of predetermined outcomes of employment, education, training, and ultimately, 'citizenship'. This framework not only impinges upon the integrity of the youth work relationship but deflects from the possibility of developing inter-professional approaches which centre the needs of young people.

The JRF research revealed a marked disinclination to refer young people to 'connected' services. Youth workers suggested that services were not adequate (Wylie, 2004) or that inappropriate responses from partners might undermine the trust developed between young person and youth worker. (Projects 19, 6). Anxiety is reinforced when a whole range of inter-related services are seeking to evaluate their work in similar terms with similar young people. Other services in the network are liable to claim credit for 'outcomes' when the greatest investment has been made through the processes of relationship-building in youth work (Angel Group, 2004).

The principle of partnership working is not problematic (Workshop Notes). However, research participants believed that successful partnership could only be achieved if the perspectives and professionalism of youth work were accorded equal status. That this cannot be assumed is partly due to the ambiguity about professionalism which has characterised youth work for virtually the whole of its history (Davies, 1988), and partly connected with the lack of parity implied by sub-degree status of the professional youth work qualification (Jeffs and Spence, *forthcoming*). These in turn are associated with the difficulties which beset youth workers in communicating the meaning of their practice.

The lack of a precise practice language is implicated in the apparent willingness of youth workers to take on each and every task related to young people and also in the assumption that youth work can be mobilised in support of, or as an aspect of any other service. The fuzziness of the boundaries of youth work leads to expectations which are frequently inappropriate and which workers on the ground are then forced to manage.

When you're working with people it's about making sure that everyone knows what you're doing and what your limitations are. We can't wave a magic wand and these young people will disappear... We can't say to young people 'yeah, it will be OK, don't worry, we'll sort your housing out and your benefits and everything will be OK' because that's not true either... The main issues are making sure young people know what you're capable of doing and what you're able to do and that... you do have limitations. I think making sure the community know that you haven't got a magic wand, and that other professionals know that you can't do everything, because when you are out there – and they say 'Yeah, but you can talk to young people out on the streets. How can you do that? You must be able to do this, this and this', and you think, ... that's just not it (15).

It is indicative that the worker quoted here was able to say what the work was not, and to assert the need for 'limitations' but gave no positive outline of what the work *is*. A profession without its own language is particularly vulnerable in a climate of tight political and institutional control of policy objectives and efficiency drives tied to targeted funding arrangements. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the current fate of youth work is to be colonised by a range of initiatives which all seem relevant to its self conception, but which constantly fail to acknowledge its central motors.

To accept that the relationships which youth workers develop with young people cannot be objectively evaluated, would be to trust them as professionals. This would underwrite equality of status within professional networks. However, the impetus of policy is moving in the opposite direction. There is demand for increased numbers of youth workers, as semi- professionals whose function is being defined instrumentally as delivering a set of outcomes which have been set entirely without reference to the niceties of process. This situation becomes self- perpetuating as youth workers conform to inappropriate evaluation regimes.

Youth Work Time

If youth workers were to assert the realities of their practice achievements, they might seem superficially very little. This may be one of the impediments to the development of an explicit language of professional practice. Because of the construction of 'youth' as 'problem', anxieties about 'relationships', problems with funding and the realities of their own low status, youth workers have tended to exaggerate the short term achievements of their work. This situation is unlikely to be improved by the current stress upon achieving targets and measuring outcomes.

Wylie (2004:27) argues that: ' In a youth population of 10,000 it is surely not unreasonable to expect that 450 might hope to get some form of accredited outcome'. This may be so. However, relationship-based youth work does not measure success in these terms. Accreditation is an

achievement, but it is only the end point of a process of engagement. In the short term, real achievements can seem microscopically unimportant. For example, many youth workers speak of the importance of encouraging a young person to make eye contact (Redfearn, 2003:12). It took one research participant over six months to achieve this with one young woman (Workshop Notes). Youth workers must move at a pace appropriate to young people:

I did a cooking project with a group of young men and I had to bring them back to the building for that, but it still took me six weeks to build up their confidence in order to bring them into the building (13).

For the worker in this situation, the primary short term outcome is having brought the young people to use the building. However, it is more likely that the cooking skills will be accredited and recorded. Such distortion is not merely a question of external assessment of the value of practice, but also of the youth worker's self confidence regarding what is 'objectively' important. The opportunity to evaluate through 'recorded' outcomes (DfES, 2004) might enable workers to identify what is meaningful in their own terms, but only if they are confident that achievements which can seem everyday and mundane actually carry weight.

Youth work outcomes can be somewhat intangible in the short term but workers are unsure about how to affirm the long term impact of their interventions. Retrospective accounts suggest that youth work has an effect which achieves fruition in adulthood (Montagu, 1954; Rose, 1998; Smith [H] 2002). However, until there is longitudinal research evidence to support anecdotal accounts, it remains difficult to make the case. Current accounting procedures add nothing to this area of understanding.

Working in more appropriate time frames would acknowledge the labour-intensive nature of youth work practice. In one project observed during the JRF research, a part time worker walked around the neighbourhood and called into two homes. He talked to a fifteen year old girl excluded from school as she watched TV, and listened to her mother worrying about another child. He helped a grandmother complete a form applying for help towards Christmas presents for the five grandchildren for whom she was sole carer, whilst discussing with a grandson the reasons why he had set off the fire alarm at school during the fire-fighters' strike. Meanwhile, the boy's mother, a heroin addict, sought his advice about benefits. Later, he gathered a group of young people together for a 'deejaying' session in a local community centre. After this, he took a particularly isolated young man whose mother had a mental illness, to a boxing club and 'partnered' the young man in the exercises (Project 8). Such richness of practice is not easily contained within organisations which are narrowly targeted and evaluated according to short term outcomes.

Youth work, particularly detached and outreach, is time-expensive. Workers often find themselves spread too thinly, with expectations far in excess of their capacity.

You were moving around from area to area on a relatively often basis but working with young people in an outreach situation needs sustained, long term work...you need time to actually engage the young people, get their trust and actually get to know them, what makes them tick and actually alter, or try and influence, their behaviour and activities, and you don't do that by sort of jumping around from area to area. You've got to work in one area, concentrate on that area and try to make a difference in that area (17).

What these workers found most objectionable is what they called the 'fire-fighting approach':

Sometimes we will get a phone 'there's young people out here causing problems and come and sort them out. Move them on', and that's what they want, they want to move them from A to B. We do it, but it's not a way I think you can work successfully with young people and their communities, because it doesn't really get you anywhere. And I do stress that we are not the fire brigade, you know, you can't call us out and we put out the fire (15).

Successful interventions require patient, sustained and long term work not only with targeted young people, but also with others who are part of the landscape of their lives: 'I see it as a long-term process, and the needs of the communities I've worked in, in the past, need a long-term commitment in order to start addressing the need' (6). This demands a more generous and open-ended arrangement for the scope of intervention.

Conclusion

There is potential for youth work to make a significant contribution to the lives of young people. However, the policy framework pursued by government tends to credit its secondary rather than its primary achievements. Policy expectations do not necessarily run counter to the goals of youth work intervention and many youth workers are in sympathy with the need to offer sound advice, structured support and specialist help to young people who are in need. However, there are crucial aspects of practice which lie behind the possibility of achieving such outcomes and these are relational rather than instrumental. Accounting for the quality of influence within a series of relationships with individuals and groups of young people in their social context does not sit easily with a requirement to record outcomes and achieve accredited results for targeted groups.

Successful youth work practice involves risk. There is risk in the personal elements of the relationships, in the impossibility of micro-management, and in the need to trust in long term

benefits which cannot be pre-determined. To sponsor youth work in the terms in which it is most likely to fulfil its potential requires that a delicate balance be achieved between the need for accountability and the conditions needed to establish worthwhile relationships especially with young people who find it difficult to trust institutions. Accountability can only be worthwhile if its criteria reflect the realities of practice. The terms of evaluation need to take cognisance of small everyday triumphs on the one hand and the long term benefits of participation on the other. The current emphasis upon accreditation is a distortion in these terms.

The move towards 'recorded' as well as 'accredited' outcomes is a step towards acknowledging that there is something within youth work which demands self-definition. However, it likely that such recordings will be constructed according to institutionally created criteria and that they will be construed as a 'lesser' outcome than accreditation. Until youth workers themselves are able to develop a language which articulates practice in their own terms, it is likely that even recordings will fail to reflect the priorities of practice.

Without empirical evidence, theoreticians who make claims about the meanings of practice in opposition to the momentum of policy will be too easily dismissed as 'academic nay sayers' (Wylie, 2004a:18). If youth work is to become a respected profession, taking its place meaningfully in an integrated approach to young people, aspects of youth work which are unique must be acknowledged. Otherwise youth work practice will remain torn between the instrumental, tangible programmes and activities which produce concrete outcomes and those aspects of the work which are relational, organic and process-based and appear to lie at its heart.

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Notes

¹ Numbers refer to a particular project. Unless indicated, all extracts are quoted from interviews with project co-ordinators and managers undertaken by telephone or during participant observation. 'Workshop Notes' refers to data derived from the developmental weekend workshop.